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WASHINGTON POST
16 December 1983

Justice Probe Fails To Disclose Source Of Leaks on Mideast

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An extensive Justice Department investigation into purported unauthorized disclosures of U.S. military and diplomatic strategy in Lebanon has ended without identifying the source of the disclosures or determining whether national security was compromised, administration officials said yesterday.

"There is no evidence that reporters were told anything we didn't want them to know," one official said.

The inquiry triggered an angry confrontation between then-national security affairs adviser William P. Clark and White House chief of staff James A. Baker III, reportedly prompted Secretary of State George P. Shultz to say he would resign if asked to take a polygraph test, and caused widespread concern among many top administration officials questioned at length by the FBI.

One official said the investigation may have had "a preventive effect" on information leaks. But another official contended that the inquiry had damaged the administration by "trivializing national security" and involving the Justice Department in a White House power struggle.

President Reagan ordered the investigation of his senior White House staff, Cabinet officers and foreign policy advisers Sept. 13. He acted after being told by Clark that news accounts, including a story on the front page of that morning's Washington Post, containing classified information had jeopardized special envoy Robert C. McFarlane's efforts to obtain a cease-fire in Lebanon and may have endangered his life.

NBC News reported on the evening of Sept. 12 that "top administration officials have asked the president to seriously consider ordering U.S. air strikes on Syrian positions in Lebanon." The NBC account, by White House correspondent Chris Wallace, was confirmed by administration officials in time for both CBS and ABC to carry the item on their evening newscasts.

The Washington Post then reported on Sept. 13 that Reagan had authorized Marines to call for air strikes "against forces shelling their positions." This report also was quickly confirmed for several other newspapers.

One official said yesterday that the information had been confirmed "and apparently disclosed in the first place" because some administration officials wanted the Syrian-backed forces to know that the Marines would retaliate if fired upon.

In addition, sources said yesterday, the threat to McFarlane's life, though real, may have been exaggerated to encourage Reagan to order the investigation. They said McFarlane had been told of concern for his safety and had declined additional protection.

Officials said that Clark and others in the White House had received reports that McFarlane was a likely target of terrorists opposed to the Lebanese cease-fire he was trying to negotiate. But one senior official said there was "no warning of an actual event," meaning a specific attempt on McFarlane's life.

Clark subsequently has become Reagan's secretary of the interior and McFarlane has replaced him as national security affairs adviser.

Clark's recommendation to Reagan to launch the investigation, strongly supported by White House counselor Edwin Meese III, touched off a bitter battle with Baker.

Sources said the original draft of the letter submitted to the president by Clark and Meese specifically empowered the use of polygraphs and also put Attorney General William French Smith in charge of the investigation. The draft letter gave Smith the authority to determine the source of the disclosure and went on to say that the person so identified would be instructed to resign, in effect giving Smith the authority to fire the suspected "leaker."

Clark reportedly said he was "damned angry" over what he described as repeated unauthorized disclosures of national security information. But his proposal to have Reagan approve an investigation of his own staff provoked an equally angry reaction from Baker, who opposed the use of polygraphs in the inquiry and also opposed putting Smith in charge of it.

Baker contended that Reagan would be politically embarrassed if it became known that he had authorized an investigation of his own staff over a relatively minor issue. He also defended his own prerogatives, pointing out that Reagan previously had signed an order putting Baker in charge of such investigations when they involved the White House staff.

Baker was backed by Shultz, who said he would resign rather than have his loyalty questioned by a lie detector test, and by deputy chief of staff Michael K. Deaver, sources said.

Reagan deleted the passages specifically authorizing polygraph tests and giving Smith the authority to

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